

The Promise of Information – Using HMIS Data to Address Homelessness

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Thank you, Dennis for your kind introduction.

Twenty-three years ago when I first began serving homeless people with other volunteers on the first breadline in downtown Boston since the Great Depression, we didn't think for one moment about data or research or counts or statistical or data standards. The only numbers we were interested in were the number of sandwiches and cups of coffee we should make for that day. In the early days we made 100 sandwiches and prepared to serve 75 cups of coffee. We averaged about 50 people in those first days back in 1980. Eventually, as the line increased, we increased the slicing of cold cuts, the unpacking of bread, the fashioning of sandwiches, and the brewing of coffee.

After a year the line increased to over 100 and after a year and a half we were up to 150 and by year two, 250. We just kept making the sandwiches and brewing the coffee. We had a simple formula. For every person expected we prepared two sandwiches and made one and a half cups of coffee. And we volunteers would each chip in a go off to the local Woolworth's and buy enough cookies so that everyone had a couple.

Little did we know that we were gathering data based on our past "research" to meet projected need. And even for a breadline that size and the limited resources to support it, those computations helped us stay on target.

I long, now, after 15 months in Washington for the simplicity of that breadline and our uncomplicated system. If we ran short, we just went back to the kitchen, and made more sandwiches or coffee.

Even in my work advocating for homeless people in a small city, then Greater Boston, then Massachusetts with each geographical expansion the work was more complex, and seemingly the resources more limited. No more was it possible to just go to the kitchen to catch up and supplement. Often there was no supplementing.

I learned that each resource for homeless people was finite. Limited. A trip to the "kitchen," now in reality the legislature or administration did not always result in the needed supplement. If even there was a time that we needed a breaking of the five loaves and two fishes into overflowing bounty, it was for now for this population. But no one I know of has that miraculous capacity. But less mysterious means, we discovered, could sometimes do the trick.

What we did learn was that if we collected information, compiled data, supported research, we would strengthen our capacity to generate new resources. While less miraculous and mysterious, it worked.

When we brought the data we had collected at the front door of homeless programs to the policy makers, we could conduct our own alchemy. We traded numbers for resources. The very essence of advocacy.

When our numbers were challenged, we weren't defensive. "Show us yours," we said, "and if they be credible, we'll withdraw ours."

The sad reality was that none of these other systems had numbers – not foster care, not substance abuse, not mental health, not corrections. Not with regard to discharge dispositions.

Our numbers stood and in standing won resources much needed to ameliorate difficult circumstances of those at risk of homelessness and those already fallen.

Had we tried to accomplish our alchemy another way – say trading anecdote and hear say for resources, we'd have been turned away at the door.

We learned and I learned that data and research could drive policy and increase resources. A lesson I've never forgotten.

That's why now in Washington the Interagency Council's work is premised on a management agenda whose foundation rests on data and research. A management agenda that is data driven, performance based and results oriented.

It's an old fashioned approach that has re-captured the minds and intents of the past several administrations and only now is being applied to investment in homelessness. Research and data come first. Then policy. Followed by resource investment and implementation. Then more research to ensure our trajectory is true.

You've undoubtedly heard of our initiative to end chronic homelessness in this country in the next ten years. An initiative borne out of research that constellated policy and now modest investment. As research tell us that we're making visible, measurable, quantifiable change for that population, moving people off the streets and out of shelters into housing and stability, the investment will increase. The way we'll know is through the data and research.

You've all heard in one way or another about the Tipping Point, most recently in Malcolm Gladwell's best selling book of that name. His premise is not

complicated. For any big social problem there is only a small amount of new resources to be invested. (When has it been otherwise?) Gladwell tells us that the investment of those resources through “intelligent action” in the most visible expression of the problem is a way not only to resolve the visible, but the means by which to “tip” the whole problem. Innovation is key, as is the remoralization that comes with accomplishment. The belief that change is possible, even on the seemingly intractable issue.

Just recently on England we’ve seen this strategy carried out. Four years ago the Blair Government decided to recommit to homelessness. They were tired of resultless efforts and a lack of outcomes on investment. Sound familiar?

They decided to target what they call “rough sleeping.” We call these folk “street people;” they say “rough sleepers.” They created a management based strategy that called for results. They made a modest investment, implemented the strategy, and collected the data.

A month ago we had the architects of the plan come to the White House, to the Council meeting. They reported that “rough sleeping” in England had decreased by 60%. That 6 in every 10 people on the street were now in.

Part of their strategy was repetitive street counts against data and research-based baseline. When they invested they could demonstrate whether or not the strategy was having the intended result. If necessary, the strategy was tweaked to provide the outcomes sought. Not punitive response; but planful.

They invested in “intelligent action” in the most visible expression of the public issue and made visible, quantifiable, measurable change. The result – they have created a new sense of hope and determination about the issue as a whole, and new investment in family homelessness among others is now being made.

They’ve succeeded in “tipping” the issue toward a tipping point. Through research and data collection they could demonstrate progress and that encouraged a renewed sense of commitment and resources.

I’ll conclude with my favorite recent story on data and research influencing policy around seemingly intractable problem. This past week the President was in Africa. He made a substantial commitment on behalf of our government in combating AIDS.

While the President received the headlines this weekend the origin of the commitment is in an unlikely elected official. None other than former Secretary Jesse Helms. And even more confounding is that the genesis of our government’s activities is in conversations between the most conservative Mr. Helms and a practitioner of politically active rock and roll, U2’s Bono.

Schmoozing between this odd couple seems unlikely, and that it would result in policy change, unthinkable.

Who'd have guessed those two would get together in the first place? And who'd guess that the topic would be AIDS – Africa!

If I told you a few years ago that this would happen, you'd have ordered a cat scan of my brain. "No way," Bono's fans would have told you. "No way he'd meet with Jesse Helms. He's too smart and humanitarian to do that." "No way," Jesse Helms' constituents would have told you. "No way he'd meet with some left leaning rock and roll impresario. What would they talk about?"

But there they were. Talking. Enjoying themselves. Sharing ideas. Comparing spiritual journeys.

It's a strange world. Who'd have guessed that just a few weeks after their meeting one of them would write a column for the Washington Post and say: "There is no reason why we cannot eliminate, or nearly eliminate, mother to child transmission of HIV-AIDS - - just as polio was virtually eliminated 40 years ago. Drugs and therapies are already provided to many in Africa and other afflicted areas. Only more resources are needed to expand this most humanitarian of projects," he wrote.

Bono? You'd expect it from him. He's made a career of using his musical celebrity to tackle political and social issues. No surprise that he would author such sentiments.

Jesse Helms? Wouldn't expect it from him. He's not known for his sympathy to the AIDS issue or to issues related to Africa. Nor is he known as someone who champions government interventions. He's for limited government. Doesn't add up to Senator Jesse Helms.

Well, it was written by the Senator. And he did indicate that he was ashamed he hadn't done more concerning the world's AIDS pandemic. He did speak about the crisis in sub-Saharan Africa. And, most importantly, he did offer an amendment to add \$500 million to fight the pandemic. In fact he says of the funding: "The goal of this new money will be to make treatment available for every HIV-positive pregnant woman." He went on to write: "As President Bush would say, we will leave no child behind."

Eliminating mother to child transmission of HIV-AIDS. What a notion. There was a growing collective sense that such a goal was unattainable. Some knew the politics weren't right. Some knew the distribution of the needed medicine wouldn't happen. Most knew that public opinion couldn't be mustered.

In his article Senator Helms noted that “more than half a million babies in the developing world would contract from their mothers the virus that causes AIDS” in his very first sentence. He went on to note that “experts believe that more than 2 million pregnant women in sub-Saharan Africa have HIV. Of these nearly one-third will pass the virus along to their babies.”

He goes on to say that “mother-to-child transmission of AIDS [is] the number one killer of children under 10 in the world.” He further points out that the “United Nations has already set an ambitious goal of reducing the portion of infants infected with HIV by 20 percent by 2005 and 50 percent by 2010.” Quick enough? Not for Senator Helms. He goes on to say: “We can accelerate these efforts, saving hundreds of thousands of lives, with larger investment of public and private funds now.”

Somebody did their homework. Someone advanced the research and gathered the data. And that informed advocacy made Senator Helms an unlikely, but powerful advocate.

Now let's get our numbers right. As long as the crisis in Africa was anecdotal, not much was happening in response. When research yielded data, the result was informed advocacy.

The time has come for us to advance the research, to gather the data and win allies locally, in our states, and in the Congress. Allies who will be informed by irrefutable data gathered from programs in neighborhoods, communities, and states all over our country.

HUD is equipping you to do it – with resources, with technical assistance, with a vision. They're giving you the means to improve the advocacy. They're arming you to make the case. Do it.

The equation is irresistible. Better data + improved advocacy = Increased resources.

That's what data and research can lead to – the investment that will result in the outcome we desire, the abolition of homelessness beginning with the elimination of chronic homelessness in the next ten years.

Which is more likely – that Senator Helms would meet with rock star Bono and subsequently call for increased funding for the AIDS pandemic in sub-Saharan Africa – three unlikely occurrences – the aggregate odds of all three happening would make the odds makers quiver in Las Vegas. Or, that given our collective commitment, expertise, and resolve, the end of chronic homelessness is just years away?

A month ago, if I were a betting man, the former would have been too unthinkable and the latter more likely. Now that the former has happened, the latter is not only doable, but you'd best set your watches, mark your calendars. This social tragedy is coming to an end.